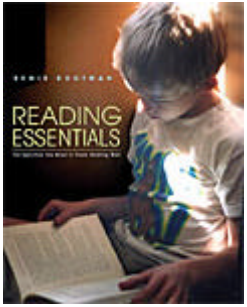

Plan for and Monitor Independent Reading is and excerpt from *Reading Essentials: The Specifics You Need to Teach Reading Well* by Regie Routman.

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6 Plan for and Monitor Independent Reading

If proficient readers typically read extensively on their own, as the research suggests, it would seem prudent, even scientific, to develop this habit in young readers.

—Thomas Newkirk

One August, I received a phone call from a colleague and friend who teaches fourth grade. "Confidentially, my students' proficiency test scores weren't as good as I expected. I have some questions about my reading program." She went on to tell that the students of the teacher down the hall had received similar test scores. "I can't figure that out," she wailed. "You know I do a much better job with guided reading. My students' test scores should have been higher."

My friend is one of the best teachers of reading I know. I've watched her conduct superb small-group guided reading lessons; she spends lots of additional time teaching comprehension strategies; she has occasional literature conversations; she assigns meaningful independent work.

"When do they read?" I asked. "When do they get to read books they can choose?"

"Well, the other stuff takes so much time, we only have ten or fifteen minutes a day for independent reading."

Aha. Here was the critical difference. The teacher down the hall started off each morning with an independent reading program, thirty to forty minutes in which the students read books of their own choosing and the teacher monitored how they were doing. I knew exactly what was going on in that classroom because I had demonstrated for and coached that teacher for a year. Even though she was a less skilled teacher of guided reading—and in fact was inconsistent about meeting with small groups—she had an excellent, carefully monitored, independent reading program in place, fully supported by an ample classroom library and daily reading conferences.

I suggested to my friend that she consider reallocating her reading time to include at least thirty minutes a day for independent reading. Just as important, I strongly suggested she think about putting a classroom library in place. Even though she had lots of books in her room, they were not organized so students could get at them easily.

Let me be very clear here. Just adding more time and space for independent reading is not enough. I'm advocating a carefully designed, structured reading program that includes demonstrating, teaching, guiding, monitoring, evaluating, and goal setting along with voluntary reading of books students choose.

Students Need to Do More Reading

My friend's story is not unique. Other teachers and principals have shared similar stories about doing lots of comprehension instruction and whole-class and small-group work with less-successful-than-expected results. I generally hear these stories after the test scores come in. Always, I suggest, "They need to be doing more reading." When an independent reading component is added, test scores go up.

Tragically, many intermediate-grade teachers are dropping independent reading as a regularly scheduled part of their instructional reading program. And even when time is allotted to independent reading, increasingly a computerized reading-incentive program (see pages 198–200) is in charge, not the classroom teacher. Additionally, many of our struggling readers lose their independent reading time, because this is often when they leave the classroom for supplemental reading instruction.

Any reading program that substantially increases the amount of reading students do will impact their reading achievement. Indeed, this is the main

reason those computerized reading-incentive programs seem to work: students are required to read for long blocks of time. You can easily do the same thing without an expensive program. In fact, you can do better, because there is no teaching component in those incentive programs.

There is a caution here, however. Not all students automatically improve their reading just because we give them time to read. If students are reading mostly difficult books, if they don't understand what they read, if no one is monitoring their progress, not much changes. I have been in far too many classrooms where students are staring at books they cannot and do not read and where sustained silent/independent reading is largely a waste of time.

Struggling Readers Need Much More Time to Read

I recently spent a week teaching reading in a school in an economically deprived area. Low-performing readers spent the last hour of an extended day in a teacher-directed, regimented reading program while the rest of the students read independently. Since this was the only time of the day set aside for independent reading, struggling readers never got to practice reading and just read. What a sad irony. The kids who need to read the most are given the least amount of time in which to do so. Brian, who did not become a reader until he was a sophomore in high school, says it perfectly:

> My advice to anybody who wants to become a better reader is to read more, to read lower books and practice so you can move up to higher levels. If you want to know how to read better, just keep on reading.

If our struggling readers and learners with special needs are to become successful readers, they need more than good instruction. They need to do massive amounts of real reading and writing of authentic texts. Richard Allington found that struggling readers who are in classrooms with exemplary teachers read and write two to five times the amount of connected text that students in classrooms with typical teachers do. We teachers are the only ones who can make this increase in reading happen and put an end to the substandard instruction that many of our low-performing students receive. (See Appendix A for meaningful, proven ways to teach struggling readers and increase the amount of reading they do.)

What Do We Mean by an Independent Reading Program?

Although I use the terms *sustained silent reading* and *independent reading* interchangeably—and do so throughout this book—some educators see sustained silent reading and independent reading as two separate entities. Therefore, let me explain the differences as I see them. However, my definition of independent reading is the one I will be referring to whenever I use either term.

SUSTAINED SILENT READING	INDEPENDENT READING
Student chooses any book to read	Student chooses any book to read
	Teacher may guide selection
Daily time to read, 10–30 minutes	Daily time to read, 30 minutes or more
Optional classroom library	Excellent classroom library, essential
Book may be above reading level	Student reads mostly "just- right" books
No checking by teacher	Teacher monitors comprehension
No writing involved	Student keeps a reading record
No teaching involved	Teaching occurs during a conference
No reading goals set	Teacher and student set reading goals

Research Strongly Supports Independent Reading

A longstanding, highly respected body of research definitively shows that students who read more, read better, and have higher reading achievement. You need to familiarize yourself with this research, because the value of free-choice voluntary reading in classrooms has recently been called into question. In order to maintain this critical practice, you may well need to cite research linking independent reading with achievement (see Notes, page A-17) and to share this information with administrators and parents. A sample letter to parents is included in Appendix C.

Connect Independent Reading with Teaching and Evaluating

Common sense tells us that if we want to get good at an activity, regardless of what that activity is, we have to practice it. Practice without feedback, however, is not as efficient as monitored practice. There is a delicate balance here. We need to set the learner up with just enough of a challenge so he can work out problems for himself and become self-monitoring, self-regulating, and independent. Too much challenge will lead to frustration; too little will eventually lead to boredom.

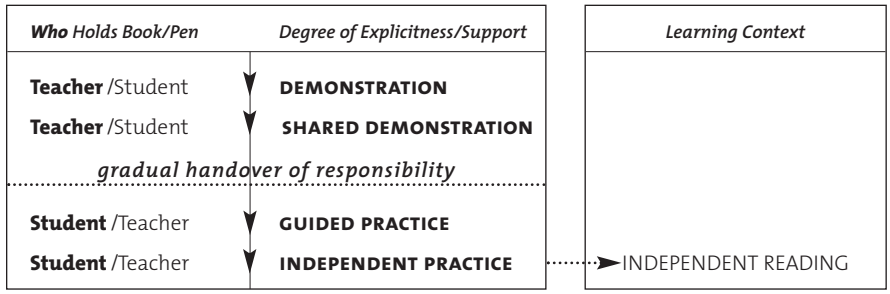
In my thirty-five years of teaching, I have always maintained an independent reading program, but it has never been just "take out your book and read." It has always meant making sure students are:

- ☐ Matched with a book (or other reading material) they can read and understand.
- ☐ Reading a text they enjoy.
- ☐ Practicing and trying out strategies we've been demonstrating and working on in class.
- ☐ Being monitored, assessed, and evaluated on the books they are reading.
- ☐ Being taught strategies and how to apply them to problem solve and read independently.
- ☐ Setting and working on goals to further improve their reading competency.

My years in the classroom have shown me that when a daily sustained silent reading program includes not only careful monitoring of students' progress but teaching what the student needs to know to be able to move forward, reading comprehension improves. This is not necessarily true when students are just given time to read. For example, with a computerized reading-incentive program, students do lots of reading and move through levels, but they may or may not be reading for understanding.

Notice Where Independent Reading Fits in the Optimal Learning Model

Revisiting the optimal learning model (see page 87; also see pages 43–50 and the chart on inside of the front cover), we see that independent reading is not just another activity to add to your reading program but is the crucial learning context in which the reader assumes responsibility for applying smart reading behavior in order to gain and maintain understanding. Independent reading provides the indispensable practice that literacy learners require to become



The Optimal Learning Model's Progression of Responsibility

successful, self-regulating, self-monitoring readers. This independent practice includes response. That is, teacher feedback is necessary to ensure readers are applying what we've been teaching them, are reading for understanding, and are continuing to set new goals.

If you have an excellent, carefully monitored independent reading program in place, supported by a wonderful classroom library (see Chapter 5), guided reading is put into proper perspective. Also, by carefully monitoring individual students during independent reading (see pages 100–105), you learn what skills and strategies you need to teach next. Many of these skills and strategies apply to the majority of students and, as such, can be demonstrated through reading and thinking aloud and shared reading experiences.

An Independent Reading Program Is Essential

Ironically, when teachers are pressed for time, independent reading is usually the first thing to be cut. Yet a carefully monitored independent reading program is the single most important part of your reading instructional program. What's more, it's fun, it's easy to implement and manage, and kids love it. They get to choose books they're interested in, to talk about those books with their friends, and to have uninterrupted time in school—to read! There's nothing better. You get to read, too, if you choose to. I like to read one or two days a week and show students what I'm reading and thinking about. The other days I use for individual conferences. The exception is at the beginning of the school year, when I use each day to get to know students as readers—both through interviews (see pages 20–21) and reading conferences. (See pages 212–215 for some examples of how teachers changed their daily schedules to make time for—or increase the time spent on—independent reading.)

COMPONENTS OF AN INDEPENDENT READING PROGRAM

- ☐ A well-designed and well-stocked classroom library, one that has been set up with and by students, includes their interests and preferences (see Chapter 2), and provides comfortable seating areas.
- ☐ Sustained time each day in which to read.
- ☐ Teacher as reader (see Chapter 3).
- ☐ "Just-right" books.
- ☐ An array of genres.
- ☐ Time for sharing and book talks.
- ☐ One-to-one student-teacher conferences (to include teaching, assessing and evaluating on the spot, and goal setting).
- ☐ Well-maintained reading records (see pages 33–36).
- ☐ Procedures that have been developed in connection with the students, then modeled and understood, and that are followed by everyone.

Set Up Classroom Procedures

You will want to negotiate these with your students, but here are some simple guidelines you may ask them to consider:

- ☐ Be sure the book you are reading is one you like and understand.
- ☐ Have with you as many books as you might need for the entire period (including some student-authored work).
- ☐ Once you have selected your place to read, stay there.
- ☐ Read quietly.
- ☐ Maintain a reading record (essential for grade 2 and above, optional for kindergarten and grade 1). (Pages 33–36 discuss the criteria for reading records and present some examples.)

You will also want to discuss and agree on procedures and guidelines for handling books, deciding what to read next when you can't find a book, and transporting books between home and school. For your readers who struggle, you may need to preselect and set aside a group of appropriate books (but only until they have learned to select "just-right" books themselves) to ensure they are reading during this time and not wandering around the room searching for books.

teaching tip

Chatterbox

At the end of sustained silent/independent reading, have students take about five minutes to discuss their reading in pairs or as a small group. Walk around, listen in, observe behavior and responses, and make anecdotal notes.

Occasionally, you may want to have directed independent reading, when you ask students to read and do one of the following as a follow-up and evaluation of what you have been teaching. In other words, "When you are reading today:

- ☐ Try using the strategy (or strategies) we've been working on.
- ☐ Notice how your character is behaving and what makes him behave that way [for fiction].
- ☐ Visualize a setting the author describes.
- ☐ Make a connection to your life.
- ☐ Be on the lookout for a strong chapter lead—an enticing beginning.
- ☐ Reread when you lose meaning.
- ☐ Use what you already know to figure out what words mean.
- ☐ Note how an illustration or visual helps your understanding."

For maximum engagement and application, instead of having students practice what you've been teaching using pieces in an anthology, have them read and practice with books they've chosen themselves. When they finish, students can share with a partner, in a small group, or as a whole class. You might ask them to read aloud a great lead or description or share a favorite passage.

Once you know your students as readers, you may occasionally want to walk around and spot-check each student while the class is reading independently. Also, you may want to devote some days to texts other than books—magazines, catalogues, instruction booklets, student-published stories, newspapers, comic books, raps, whatever.

Value Independent Reading in Kindergarten

In kindergarten, much of daily independent "reading" is really time spent looking at books. Students gain confidence as readers by browsing, interacting with, and enjoying reading materials they choose to "look" at. Often, these are familiar books, poems, charts, and texts that have previously been read during shared reading or read-aloud or created during shared writing. Many of these texts are predictable and have a rhythm and/or rhyme that supports developing readers' growing phonemic awareness, word competency, and fluency.

Independent reading in kindergarten should increase from about ten minutes at the start of the school year to about twenty minutes by midyear. Students can use this time to become familiar with the way books work, concepts of print, informational books, authors, fiction books, poetry, and more, and to develop positive attitudes about reading.

Beginning the day with free choice reading instead of worksheets

Many teachers walk around the room informally assessing students, both by "listening in" and by making notes as students are reading. Other times, teachers deliberately sit down next to students to observe them read, take anecdotal notes, guide students forward, give encouragement, set new goals, and celebrate successes. Some teachers are very deliberate about this assessment, seeing four or five students each day, dividing their class into Monday's children, Tuesday's children, and so on. Expert teachers observe what the child is already attempting to do as a reader and build on that rather than focus on deficits.

Once behavior, expectations, and procedures have been carefully modeled and practiced, a "book look" is also a great way for kindergartners to start each day when they enter the classroom. Kindergarten teacher Melanie Fry, in Huntsville, Ohio, who used to have her children begin each day with worksheets and structured tasks, has this to say:

> This school year I stopped doing worksheets to start the day, and I will never go back! I was wasting thirty-five minutes of class time each day. Now my children spend that time reading. Each day they prepare one or two books to take home and read to their parents instead of a handful of papers that will eventually end up in the trash can. What a wonderful change the reading has made! I have watched these children gain so much confidence in their abilities and the pride they have as readers is just amazing!

Depend on Partner Reading

Partner, or paired, reading is a terrific way for students to read independently and grow as readers. Partner reading helps students, especially developing readers, "become more self-sufficient and less reliant on the teacher for assistance." Kids love partner reading and readily do so with books of their choosing. What's more, research shows that taking turns reading increases reader involvement, attention, and collaboration.

I depend on partner reading as an easy way I can manage the classroom while I am working with guided reading groups and still accomplish important reading work. Partner reading first needs to be carefully modeled so students know "what it looks like" and "what it sounds like." Robin Woods's second graders in Westminster, Colorado, created the following partner reading guidelines during a shared writing.

PARTNER READING GUIDELINES

- ☐ The **reader** holds the book.
- ☐ **Sit close** enough so both partners can see the words.
- ☐ **Take turns** reading.
- ☐ Go back and **reread** if you don't understand.
- ☐ Turn and **talk**. (Tell your partner what happened. Both partners should talk.)
- ☐ **Problem solve** with your partner. (If one partner doesn't want to read so much, the other partner can read more.)
- ☐ If your **partner is stuck on a word:**
  - ☐ Give your partner time to think (wait time).
  - ☐ Go back and reread.
  - ☐ Read past the tricky word and come back to it.
  - ☐ Slide through it.
  - ☐ Put in what makes sense.
  - ☐ Sound it out with your partner.
  - ☐ Cover part of a word and ask, "What does it say?"
  - ☐ Look at the pictures.
  - ☐ Ask, "Would you like me to help you?"
  - ☐ Tell your partner what the word is.
- ☐ **ENJOY READING!**

Partner reading

Teacher Talk

Modeling partner reading

- ☐ *I'm going to be working with reading groups [or individual reading conferences] and I can't be disturbed. You can read on your own or with a partner. Be sure you choose a book you can read and understand.* [I've already established guidelines for choosing "easy," "just-right," and "hard" books. See pages 93–95.]
- ☐ *Both of you need to be able to see the pages.*
- ☐ *What will you do if your partner doesn't know a word?*
- ☐ *Do the same thing I do in class: give your partner time to think.*
- ☐ *Stop after a couple of pages. Talk about what's happening.*
- ☐ *Partners read in quiet voices. Why is that important?*
- ☐ *Okay, Joey and his partner are going to show us what partner reading looks like and sounds like. Joey, read the first page. What will you do if you don't know a word?* [I let the class suggest strategies—see the list Robin Woods's second graders created, page 91.]
- ☐ *Kids, did you notice how they used quiet voices, how they helped each other and took turns? Okay, let's have another pair demonstrate for us and see how they do.* [If more modeling is necessary, I then demonstrate with a student.]
- ☐ *Find a place in the room where no one else is right next to you.*

Evaluate Partner Reading

When I teach students about partner reading—what it looks like and sounds like and what the expectations and procedures are—I offer demonstrations and guided practice and help students evaluate how well they are succeeding.

Teacher Talk

- ☐ *What went well in partner reading?*
- ☐ *You were acting just like a good teacher. You told your partner, "Try reading that again."*
- ☐ *Did you hear that? She gave him time to think, and they took turns.*
- ☐ *Good, you read a page, your partner read a page, and then you told your partner what happened.*
- ☐ *Were there any problems?*
- ☐ *What can you do if your partner is stuck on a word?*
- ☐ *You problem solved with your partner. When one of you didn't want to read so much, your partner did more reading, but you still took turns discussing. That's fine.*
- ☐ *Let's write down some of the things that are very important in partner reading.*

Teach Students How to Select "Just-Right" Books

In classroom after classroom, I ask, "If you're going to become a better reader, do you think you should read mostly easy books, 'just-right' books, or hard books?" Almost always, quite a few students respond, "Hard books." I tell them, "Researchers [and I explain that a researcher is a kind of scientist] have found that if you read a steady diet of books that are too hard for you, your reading actually gets worse."

A "just-right" book seems custom-made for the child—that is, the student can confidently read and understand a text he finds interesting, with minimal assistance. These are books that make students stretch—but just a little bit—so that they have the opportunity to apply the strategies we've been demonstrating (and they've been learning), as well as become familiar with new vocabulary, genres, and writing styles.

While reading lots of easy books is important for building confidence and fluency as well as for focusing on meaning, once students are competent readers, reading only easy books is not enough for continued growth. Easy reading—"light reading" (see pages 65–66), pattern books, familiar books—is, however, critical for becoming a successful reader.

By the same token, reading "hard" books is fine once in a while—when the student is very interested in a particular topic, for instance—but a steady diet of

challenging books is counterproductive. I share just two examples among many: a third-grade girl who "faked it" each day and told me, "I don't want anyone to know I can't read chapter books," and a boy who spent months "reading" detailed reference books during sustained silent reading. An informal reading conference indicated that while he was enjoying flipping through these books, he couldn't say anything specific about what he had learned. With guidance he set these books aside and selected a "just-right" book from the classroom library.

Making sure that students are comprehending and enjoying the texts they are reading is critical for students' reading success. A carefully monitored independent reading program as part of your reading workshop, total reading program, or literacy block is not an option. It is an absolute necessity. And having students spend most of their independent reading time with "just-right" books is a necessity, too, if students are to grow as readers. (See Appendix E, "Use the Goldilocks Strategy to Choose Books.")

Establish Selection Guidelines

When I ask students what a "just-right" book is, it is rare for them to talk about interest and understanding. Usually, they focus solely on getting the words right, and these days, lots of them also talk about the book being "on their level." Sadly, I am interacting with more and more students who use the level designation placed on the book as their only selection criterion. Without that designation, many are unable to select a suitable book. Once teachers become aware of that troubling deficiency, they deliberately take their students to the library and demonstrate how to select a "just-right" book and guide students in doing so.

To gauge what your students know and apply about book selection and, also, as part of the process of teaching students how to select appropriate texts for reading, begin to develop guidelines in shared writing. (See Appendix F for second graders' guidelines for easy, "just-right," and hard books. See the charts on pages 95 and 96 for first graders' and fourth and fifth graders' criteria for "just-right" books (developed during a shared writing). Notice the focus on enjoyment and understanding.) Work with your students and help them include selection criteria that go beyond level designations and reading the words. Other factors to consider include:

- ☐ Interest.
- ☐ Ability to understand the text.
- ☐ Adequate background knowledge
- ☐ Writing style.
- ☐ Genre.
- ☐ Supportive illustrations or visuals.
- ☐ Vocabulary.
- ☐ Book format and size.
- ☐ Favorite author or series.

TRY IT APPLY IT

- ✐ Through a shared writing with your students, develop criteria for choosing a "just-right" book. Once you have excellent guidelines, glue a copy to the inside of students' reading records.
- ✎ Share criteria with caregivers and encourage them to use these criteria with their children when selecting books at the library or bookstore. (See letter to parents in Appendix D.)
- ✏ Save your present criteria to use as a guide when developing guidelines with next year's students.

A "JUST-RIGHT" BOOK FOR GRADE 1

- I like it.
- I can read most of it.
- I understand it. (I can tell someone what it's about.)

"JUST-RIGHT" BOOKS FOR A GRADE 4–5 CLASS

It's interesting; you like it!

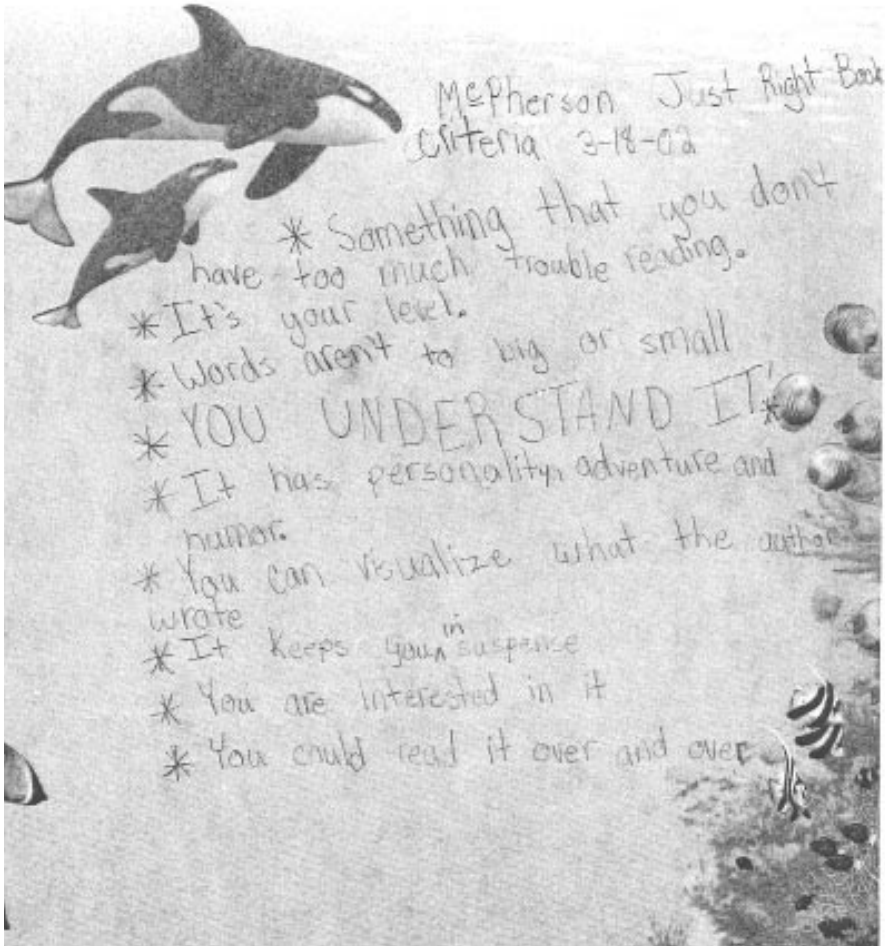
- The title is appealing.
- You know and like the author.

You are comfortable reading it!

- The print is the right size.
- You like the illustrations.
- Some places are smooth; some are choppy.

You can read it!

- You understand the plot and can predict.
- You can tell others what it is about.
- There are only a few words per page you don't know.



Criteria for just-right books by fourth graders

Demonstrate That Reading Words Accurately Is Not Enough

Lots of students, and parents too, believe that if they can read the words, the book is at their reading level. In fact, many students—especially older struggling readers—can read the words but are unable to say what the text is about. Fluency involves much more than smooth reading.

TRY IT APPLY IT

- Bring in a text in which you can read the words but don't have the background and vocabulary to understand it—a physics text, a technical manual, a philosophy book, a methods textbook filled with impenetrable jargon, whatever is a very difficult text for you. Then, read aloud fluently and attempt to retell what you've read. Students will see that although you can read the words, you cannot make meaning.
- Read aloud a portion of a book that is "just right" for you. Demonstrate how you can talk about what you have just read, what the text is about, what you have learned, and what you think might come next. Confirm that reading "just-right" books means you are able to tell someone what the book is about and what you have learned.
- Congratulate the student who is able to say, "This book is too hard for me, because I don't understand what it is about." Help that child find a suitable book.
- Let students know that a book that may be too difficult now may be "just right" in a few months.
- If a student is interested in a book that is too difficult right now, send a note home requesting that a caregiver read the book aloud.

Don't Underestimate the Importance of Choice

Letting students choose what they read in a classroom and school that have excellent libraries is essential for a successful independent reading program and for turning students on to reading. And the choice needs to be real. One intermediate-grade teacher let her students choose what historical fiction book they would read for independent reading—but it had to be historical fiction, which left some students unmotivated. And a second-grade teacher who also taught summer school to low-performing second graders encountered this complaint: "In our classroom, we weren't allowed to pick our own books. We didn't have much time to read." The teacher took these students to the library to help them select books they were interested in, and they were amazed and grateful to be reading books they liked. Choice contributed greatly to their growth as readers.

A study of middle school students found that students preferred independent reading and teacher read-alouds above most other activities and, conversely, that assigned reading was rarely mentioned as a preference. Reading competence is closely tied to the amount of time children spend reading on their own, and students read more when they can choose their reading materials. Reading satisfaction, too, begins with personal choice.